

“Come and See”  
Based on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 and  
Great Ends of the Church: Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind  
by Rev. Meghan Davis, Longview Presbyterian Church  
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When I finally got back to my garden after more than two weeks out of town, I was dismayed to find that weeds had completely taken over my plot. Apparently, the weather we’re having this year is perfect for weeds, and not so great for vegetables. It was so bad that I literally could not make out the plants in the sea of weeds. I had to begin a long and painful task of weeding, being very careful not to “weed” plants that I intended to be growing (sadly, I was not always successful). As I was toiling away early this week, I was reminded of this passage, not realizing that this passage was the lectionary for this week. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." In Jesus’ context, mustard plants were weeds. No one in their right mind would intentionally plant a mustard seed in a field. It would take over the field, threatening your crop. It would be like sowing a blackberry seed in your field. So as I pulled weeds, lamenting the sorry state of my garden, I pondered this passage. Why would Jesus liken the Kingdom of Heaven to a field full of dirty rotten weeds?

And Jesus “told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’” The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, a necessary but impure item that is not used in ritual bread. Yeast used in a ridiculously large amount, so much that it would create more dough that the woman would be able to handle. Just as I was having trouble handling the plot full of weeds. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Kind of like the treasure of my plants, that were hidden in the field of weeds. If only I could find them...

So what is Jesus saying here? Why would he equate the Kingdom of Heaven, God’s Reign with things so undesirable and undignified as weeds and yeast? Why would he say that it is a precious treasure hidden in a profane field? Quite simply, because God’s Reign is as pervasive and unrelenting as weeds thriving a wet, cool summer. God’s Reign is as bountiful as a ridiculously large amount of yeast, expanding dough to the point of overflowing the mixing bowl, kitchen and even the entire house. Because God’s Reign, precious though it is, is hidden among us, in plain sight, in our everyday, regular lives. And that is the Good News. The Good News is the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of God is the Good News.

Over the last week, those participating in our vacation bible school for grown-ups began our study of the six Great Ends of the Church. The century-old mission statement for our denomination. This week, we scratched the surface of the first purpose of the church: The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind. The first “great end” of the church is the proclamation of the Gospel. But what is the Gospel? What is the Good News?

The Good News is: God loves us—you and me and everyone else—so much that God created us *just* to be in relationship with God. God loves us—you and me and everyone else—so much that there is nothing we can do to earn or lose that love. God loves us—you and me and everyone else—so much that God wants the best for us. God loves us so much that God wants us to reflect some of that love back to God, as much as we are capable even though we are capable of loving God with only a fraction of the love God lavishly pours out on us. God loves us so much, that God wants us to reflect some of the love out, sharing that love with one another. God loves us so much that God sent Christ to live and breathe and walk among us, to open our eyes to this wondrous love and teach us how to live up to the amazing and beautiful image of God in which we were created by loving God and one another with all our strength: minds, hearts, and soul. And God help us, 2000 years later, we're still toiling away, trying to figure it out. We still stumble and fall. But those of us who know this Good News, stumble and fall knowing that God's love is unconditional. That God's going to love us no matter what. That God forgives us no matter what. That God is there to pick us up and brush us off and will be there for us the next time we stumble and fall.

Isn't that Great News? Isn't that news worth sharing? So that's the "Gospel" part of "Proclamation of the Gospel." Let's talk a bit about the "proclamation" piece. For our purposes today, "proclamation of the Gospel" is evangelism, with an emphasis on spoken evangelism. (We'll have plenty of opportunity to discuss evangelism through our living and deeds when we discuss other Great Ends of the Church.) For our purposes today, we will use Martha Grace Reese's definition of evangelism from *Unbinding the Gospel* which the officers of this church studied a couple years ago. Reese defines evangelism as: anything you do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian community.<sup>1</sup>

*Unbinding the Gospel* was written based on the findings of a major study of mainline denominations. One of the key findings of the project was that people don't do evangelism, people *can't* do evangelism, if they don't understand their own faith, if they can't articulate their own faith. Reese notes, "Our most important discovery is that a vivid relationship with God lies at the heart of real evangelism. People who share their faith love God and believe that other people's lives would be better if they were in relationship with God, too." She identifies these four "Highlight findings of the Mainline Evangelism Project:

1. If we know why to do evangelism, we'll figure out how to do it.
2. Faith sharing arises out of vibrant relationships with God.
3. It is important to learn to talk about our faith.
4. Where it flourishes, evangelism is a high priority for pastor, congregation and individuals."

So we've talked a little bit about why we're supposed to be doing evangelism. In addition to the reasons already mentioned is an even more compelling reason: because Jesus tells us to. Time and time again in the gospels Jesus tells his disciples to spread the Good News not to mention The Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew when the last words of the resurrected Christ are: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2008), 9.

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Go therefore and make disciples... baptizing them... teaching them to obey...

But most of us in the mainline denominations don't feel comfortable evangelizing. We all have different reasons. For most of us, the word “evangelism” carries negative connotations of people yelling, holier-than-thou people, hypocritical people, people who think they have all the answers, people beating others over the head with the Bible (figuratively or literally), unrelenting people threatening hell and damnation. Many of us fear crossing a boundary of a person's right to have their own beliefs or none at all. Some of us fear that if we open the door of religious talk that we will be perceived as one of *those* people or perhaps that the person we are talking to will ask a question that we will not be able to answer.

Let's be clear on what evangelism is *not*. Other than all those negative things listed above—which do exist in the name of evangelism but are definitely not what I or anyone else has in mind for this church family—evangelism, proclamation of the gospel is *not* about getting more members into the church. It's not about Longview Presbyterian Church at all. It's about bringing people into relationship with God who are currently missing out on the amazing opportunity. It's a little like matchmaking. If you had two single friends who would be perfect for each other, wouldn't you want to get them together? Not for your own sake but for theirs? So let's not get it mixed up. It's about getting people matched up with God first, and if a happy by-product of that match is that they are called by God to join our church, then so much the better. But God is much more important than LPC or any church. It's about people and God. Not about people and the membership rolls of LPC.

So in order to be able to talk to people about our faith, we have to be able to answer the very simple yet remarkably difficult question: what's so good about being a Christian? This is a particularly difficult question to answer for those of us who have “always been Christian.” For those of us who never converted to Christianity, who don't have a defining experience of choosing to be follow Christ's Way. But it's a question we must be able to answer. “The Bible is not given to us to satisfy our curiosity, but it has been given to us in order that our lives might be changed by it.”<sup>2</sup> How has your life been changed by the Bible?

The question comes up time and time again: how is a church different than the Rotary, or any other organization that does good deeds? How are we different than any other social organization? Of course, it's the God piece. But what about the God piece? How do you explain it to someone who doesn't know God? Who finds no need for God? We do good works, but we are more than that. We have fellowship that is both about socializing with and caring for one another. But we're more than that. We worship God together which is different than having exclusively individual relationship with God and yet we are more than that, too. We are all these things combined together and yet, we are even more than that. Being a Christian, and being part of a Christian community of faith, is more than the sum of its parts.

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<sup>2</sup> K. Nicholas Yoda, “The Dogma in the Drama” in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph Small, ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2010), 28.

Several years ago, while hanging out at a beach with my cousin, he told me why he loves the ocean. He's a big guy, at least 6' 3" and by no means scrawny. He said, bathtubs are too small; even swimming pools aren't all that big; but the ocean is so huge, so much bigger than him. There is something comforting for him in being a small thing floating in the vast ocean. Being a Christian and being involved in Christian community is being part of something vastly bigger than anything else we can be part of. Bigger than our family, bigger than the organization we work for, bigger than anything else we can participate in.

At Coventry Cathedral in England, written across the top of the booklets used in worship services is written, "You are coming in on a conversation which began long before you were born and will continue long after you are dead."<sup>3</sup> Being a Christian is joining in that conversation that is as old as Creation and will continue throughout eternity.

This week I asked study members to answer in six words, no more, no less: What difference does being a Christian make in your life? How is your life better for being a Christian? My six word answer is a work in progress but here's the most recent version: God's Reign: infinite love; partner, stake-holder. (I look forward to hearing all of yours throughout the week.)

So once you are able to answer the question of how your life is changed for the better by being a Christian, we return to the question of proclamation of the Gospel. How do we proclaim? Remember, evangelism is faith sharing. As Reese notes, "Faith sharing focuses on relationships, not 'bringing in more young people,' or 'helping our church to grow again.'"<sup>4</sup> She reminds us that "The heart of evangelism is having an alive relationship with God, being part of a church you love and caring that people outside the church find what you've discovered."<sup>5</sup>

In John 1, immediately after Jesus calls Philip to be a disciple by simply saying, "follow me," it is written "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'" Presbyterian pastor Jerry Andrews points out, "Philip knows the truth about Jesus, but he does not know how to persuade his friend Nathanael. Philip's next move may seem desperate. And maybe it is, but it is also masterful, for it's the same move the Master had made. Repeating Jesus' first words to his first disciples, Philip says simply, 'Come and see.' It is an invitation that requires a response and invites the best one. Now it's up to Jesus. The burden of persuasion belongs to Jesus, and he gladly takes the burden. What does Jesus do? Jesus simply presents himself.... Philip's work is done; Jesus' work begins."

Proclaiming the Gospel isn't about *convincing* people. It's simply about sharing with people this amazing truth: God loves you! And sharing with them what that means to you, how you respond to God's love. Why would we keep that a secret? The good and challenging news is, the Mainline Evangelism Project "found no rigid formula for success, no quick fix, no silver

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Then Who Can Be Saved?" in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph Small, ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2010), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

bullet. Each one of us must enter the great adventure by thinking, learning more, praying and asking God a humble question: ‘Which small things can I do today to help more people know you?’” The good and challenging news is that proclaiming the gospel for the salvation of humankind can be as simple and as difficult as letting people know that God loves them. As simple and as difficult as inviting people to join the conversation. As simple and as difficult as saying, “come and see” and letting Christ do the rest.